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## Supporting families of foreign fighters. A realistic approach for measuring the effectiveness

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### Introduction

Recently so-called 'family hotlines' were launched in the Netherlands, France, Austria, serving as a resource for the parents and relatives who are confronted with the (potential) foreign fighter phenomenon. The hotline connects callers with social and religious services in an effort help prevent the (further) radicalisation of young Muslims or support families whose loved ones have travelled to Syria. In other countries such as Denmark (Aarhus) family talk groups were set up by the municipality or by affected parents, such as 'Les parents concernés' in Belgium. Family support is a relatively new approach within counter-radicalisation policy in which the Germans pioneered since 2012.

Supporting families is considered valuable for several reasons and can be provided at different stages (Gielen, 2014):

- In its earliest stages, family support can be provided to parents of individuals at risk, by addressing their concerns, working on (maintaining) a positive family environment with an open atmosphere in which they can discuss extremist ideas with their child and provide positive alternatives.
- If radical or extremist ideas lead to travel to a conflict zone abroad, such as Syria or Iraq, foreign fighters quite often remain in touch with their families back home.

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Family support can then be aimed at maintaining contact with their children or relatives and in creating a positive environment for a child to return home;

- When extremist views turn into violence and ultimately imprisonment, families can be supported whilst their relative is imprisoned or afterwards in the re-integration and re-habilitation process, such going back to school and helping them find a job.
- If practitioners are able to create and sustain a relationship with families of foreign fighters, then it will be easier to create an entry point for contact with the foreign fighter upon his/her return. This is of particular importance, as families are also crucial for de-radicalisation and disengagement work.
- Moreover, family members such as brothers, sisters, cousins, but also peers, form an at-risk group of travelling to Syria. Supporting families and the broader professional network of the family (such as school teachers) should enable practitioners and family members to act upon early warning signals and prevent travel of other family members or peers;
- Providing family support can work as a very powerful narrative for foreign fighters to come home. A lot of foreign fighters are afraid of returning because they fear prosecution or Guantanamo Bay<sup>2</sup>. In one country where family and individual support was offered on a local level, parents spread the word that 'the government was there to help them'. This message found its way back to the foreign fighters in Syria, providing a powerful narrative and highlighting the internal/external and local/global dimension of providing support;

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<sup>2</sup> In my own experience and that of Belgium organisation 'Les parents concernés', foreign fighters who have become disillusioned and want to return, fear being transported to Guantanamo Bay. It seems this is a narrative being used to prevent Europeans from returning home.

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- Finally, foreign fighters cause a lot of grief, anxiety, despair and upset for family members to the point they are no longer actively able to participate in society (not able to work etc.) for which psychological counselling is essential.

This article will focus on family support as part of counter-radicalisation policy. How can its effectiveness be measured? To answer this question, this article will draw on realistic evaluation which revolves around ‘what works, for who, in which context and how?’ (Pawson & Tilley 1997). It will discuss the different forms and merits of family support across Europe by drawing upon the lessons learned of practitioners engaging in family support within the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) including two case studies in which support was provided offered to families of foreign fighters by myself. Based on these practitioner experiences hypotheses on family support as part of a counter-radicalisation strategy are developed which in turn could be used for empirical testing.

### **Family support practices across Europe**

Throughout Europe several countries and organisations are already providing telephone hotlines and family support. The following three forms can be distinguished:

- National telephone hotlines such as in Germany with referral to specialised federal family support organisations
- Community based telephone hotlines such as in The Netherlands and Belgium
- Municipal forms of family support, either individual or group-based

#### *National and federal forms of support*

Germany pioneered with family support as part of their counter-radicalisation strategy when they launched their family hotline in 2012. The hotline, also known as the advice

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centre on radicalisation ('Beratungsstelle Radikalisierung'), was set up by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF)<sup>3</sup> as a general point of contact for any individual who is concerned about the (possible) radicalisation of a family member or acquaintance and has questions regarding this topic. The hotline is closely linked with the four family support facilities across the country. When people phone the hotline they are offered targeted assistance by:

- serving as a first point of contact, answering frequently asked questions and providing some general information about the problem at hand;
- offering help in individual cases and referring callers to a suitable agency
- liaising between the individual in question and relevant support agencies (statutory and non-statutory), specialists or fellow sufferers

In those cases where first aid via telephone isn't sufficient, callers are referred to one of the four NGO's in Germany: Hayat, Violent Prevention Network, Vaya Kitab or IFAK who are authorized and funded by the government to provide family support in cases regarding (possible) radicalisation or foreign fighters. Each NGO has a different background and approach to family support.

- *Hayat*<sup>4</sup>, which in Arabic means 'life', for example already had a strong tradition in family counselling within the ZDK ('Gesellschaft Demokratische Kultur'). In particular, Exit-Germany, a de-radicalisation and disengagement programme for right wing extremists and a project called 'Strengthening families against violence and extremism' which supported relatives and friends of youths in Islamic extremist environments has formed the basis for Hayat (Dantschke, 2010; Koehler 2013). Hayat aims to convince vulnerables at risk to voluntarily refrain from traveling

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bamf.de/EN/DasBAMF/Clearingstelle/Beratung/beratung.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://hayat-deutschland.de/>

abroad and to encourage those who have already left for Syria to return and reintegrate into the society. It does so by making a risk assessment and supporting and empowering the family network around the individual in question, by for example providing them with information and counter-narratives against salafi-jihadi radicalisation. The counselors maintain the confidentiality of people they advise, unless they learn of a planned terrorist attack or a trip to or from Syria.

- *The Violence Prevention Network*<sup>5</sup> is the second of the four German NGO's and aims to enable young people who are arrested for ideologically motivated acts of violence to live a responsible and non-violent. They too have a long history of counselling neo-nazi's and their families, but have now also extended their expertise to the foreign fighter phenomenon. In contrast to Hayat, their target groups are mainly people who have already committed acts of violent extremism and are imprisoned. It combines anti-violence-training with civic education and pedagogical training modules, which takes place within 5 months during imprisonment and is followed up by coaching after release. The families are also included in this training and coaching process during and after imprisonment.
- *Vaja Kitab*<sup>6</sup>, is another German group that offers a support network for parents and family members of young people who struggle with Islamic identity questions and turn to more extremist (or nationalist) Islamist organisations. Vaja Kitab is rooted in the youth work organisation Vaya, an acceptance based youth work organisation. It is located in Bremen where there is a right wing scene with strong subcultural elements such as clothing, rock music etc. VAJA started as a student project and is focused on youngsters with a tendency to right wing and intolerant attitudes in the ages of 14-20. Through counseling, Vaja Kitab can help parents, family members but also

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.violence-prevention-network.de/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.vaja-bremen.de/teams-vaja-kitab.htm>

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teachers and social workers who observe tendencies towards Islamic radicalisation, to deal with the situation and to work together with the clients to find ways to give back trust and cooperative attitudes by strengthening the family and young adolescents (directly or indirectly) within their social environment.

- The fourth and final organisation is IFAK located in Bochum, the Association for Multicultural Child and Youth Services - Migration work<sup>7</sup>. Their Advisory Network for Tolerance and Coexistence ('Beratungsnetzwerk für Toleranz und Miteinander') support parents, school, associations and educational institutions who are challenged by children, pupils or clients who are insecure in their identity formation and turn to Islamist values, traditions and structures. Their advisory network provides the necessary background knowledge as well as an effective and useful means of action in such situation.

In sum, the 'German model' consist of a partnership between the government and civil society actors. All NGO's are funded by the German government, but do not work as the extended arm of the government, police or security services. They all have a strong history in supporting families either from right-wing extremists or migrant communities. The German model has now been exported across Europe to France, Austria, and two London boroughs. However, only parts of the German models have implemented in the other respective countries. France for example did set up a national hotline, but calls aren't anonymous and referred to the police. France also does not have the institutional infrastructure and rich history of NGO's who can provide family support in relation to violent extremism. If additional help is necessary, families are referred to existing organisations of social work.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ifak-bochum.de/fachbereiche-einrichtungen/migration/beratungsnetzwerk-fuer-toleranz-und-miteinander/>

*Community operated hotlines and family support:*

Volunteers from the Moroccan community in the Netherlands recently launched a community based hotline. Serving as a resource for the parents and relatives of those whose allegiance might be drifting toward militant groups like the Islamic State, the hotline connects callers with social and religious services in an effort help prevent the radicalisation of young Muslims. A similar helpline was also launched in Belgium, called “Les parents concernés”. It is run by parents whose children who have already travelled and use that experience to help other parents preventing their children from travel. They also offer support to families whose loved one has already left or would like to return. Other examples of key figures within the community that provide family support can be found in the UK and in Sweden. In the latter, a psychologist from the Somali community supports several Somali parents whose children have travelled to Syria.

*Municipal forms of family support*

The municipality of Aarhus in Denmark has set up a family network group for family members whose children have travelled to Syria as part of their broader and already existing counter-radicalisation programme. The family group is meant to exchange experiences with parents who are in a similar situation. Access to the meetings is based on invitation only, by the police or the municipality. However, at the meetings, no police or authorities of municipalities are involved. There is a facilitator present and sometimes a psychologist. Every so often the intelligence services and the ministry of foreign affairs are invited to the meetings, so that parents can express their concerns and ask specific questions. In the city of Antwerp they noticed that whilst some parents of Belgium converts who travelled to Syria, actively reached out to the media for help, a large group of Muslim parents didn't. This is

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why the municipality of Antwerp decided to actively reach out to these families by making house calls. Parents can ask questions, and discuss their fears and anxieties. Also they are supported in keeping up the relationship with their children whilst in Syria or Iraq. It also focuses on improving intra-family communication as often family relations are strained or even problematic. This is continued also upon return from Syria or Iraq which is complemented by a tailor made exit-programme for the individual in question. In contrast to the city of Antwerp, the city of Vilvoorde in Belgium has opted for group-based family support, so that families in similar situation can share experiences and support each other. For returnees a tailor made exit-programme by the municipality in which families are included as much as possible.

### **Measuring the effectiveness of family support**

Besides an output evaluation on the Hayat intervention (Koehler, 2013) or overviews of some family support interventions (Gielen, 2014), the different forms of family support across Europe have not been evaluated. This is partly due to the fact that family support is a relatively new approach, but also because there is a general lack of evaluations in the field of counter-radicalisation (Lousberg e.a., 2009; Lub 2009, 2013; Bovenkerk & Van Hemert, 2013; Gielen & Junne 2008; Gielen & Grin 2010; Horgan & Braddock, 2010). Those evaluations that haven been done by for example Gielen (2008; 2009a; 2009b; 2009c; 2010), Bovenkerk et al. (2013), Lub (2013), Feddes et al. (2013), do not meet the ‘golden standard’ that is applied in the medical field, the randomized controlled trials (RCT’s). This classic method of quantitative oriented (quasi)experiment (randomly) divides the target audience of an intervention into an experimental and a control group. The merit of this method is that is can demonstrate a causal relationship between the intervention and the



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measured impact. However, this method is also criticized. Like other interventions in the social domain (Uitermark et al., 2012) counter-radicalisation interventions are not implemented in an isolated clinical environment, but in a social context. Their effect is influenced by and dependent of the social context in which they are implemented.

To overcome these types of challenges, Pawson and Tilley have developed the realistic evaluation method (Pawson & Tilley 1997; Pawson 2002a; 2002b), which is specifically designed to evaluate social programs, which are basically social systems in which there is an interplay between individual and institution, of agency and structure, and of micro and macro social processes (1997: 63). They have tried to settle the paradigm war between quantitative and qualitative schools of thought. They claim that quantitative knowledge often ignores context, whilst more narrative or interpretive approaches are unable to draw lessons learned which can be applied in other contexts. Avoiding the traditional epistemological poles of positivism and interpretivism, realists Pawson and Tilley (1997) stress the mechanics (M) of explanation and introduce the notion of context (C), which stems from the realist proposition that the “relationship between causal mechanisms and their effects are not fixed, but contingent” (p.69). Realistic evaluation is concerned with the combination of mechanisms and context leading to outcome patterns, also known as C-M-O configurations. Context-mechanism-outcome pattern configurations (C-M-O's) comprise models indicating how programmes activate mechanisms amongst who and in what conditions, to bring about alterations in behavioural or event of state regularities. These propositions bring together mechanism-variation and relevant context-variation to predict and to explain outcome pattern variation. In short, realistic evaluation revolves around the question of ‘what works, for who, in which context and how?’ At the core of realistic evaluation is developing and testing C-M-O configurations. However, before empirically

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testing of any intervention in the field of counter-radicalisation can begin, a rudimentary theory on C-M-O configurations needs to be developed. These hypotheses are built around the questions of what *might* work for whom in what circumstances in the field of counter-radicalisation, in case of family support as part of counter-radicalisation policy.

As discussed above, the literature on what works in the field of counter-radicalisation is very limited. As such, there is no evidence-based family support model for individuals at risk, foreign fighters or returnees. However, quite a lot of practice-based knowledge has been gathered on this topic, for example within the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) which has been set up by the European Commission as a network of networks for practitioners in the field of (counter-)radicalisation to exchange best practices and lessons. Part of the RAN is the *RAN Collection of Best Practices* which was published alongside the EU Commissioners Communication (2014) on “Preventing *Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Strengthening the EU's Response*”. This Collection was based on the two years of exchange of some 1,000 practitioners in over 50 different meetings, seminars and workshops. In the Collection eight different approaches commonly used by practitioners and Member States to prevent and combat radicalisation are identified:

- Training and raising awareness among first line practitioners
- De-radicalisation and disengagement programmes
- Conversation, both individually (mentoring) and collectively (intergroup communication)
- Community engagement and empowerment
- Supporting and empowering families
- Developing and dissemination counter-communication (‘counter-narratives’) in both the online and off line domain

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- Developing and institutional infrastructure

So within the RAN Collection practices and lessons learned of family support have been collected, based on some specific meetings on family support such as a meeting on community engagement and working with families in relation to foreign fighters to Syria. The outcomes have been integrated into the 'RAN Declaration of Good Practices for Engagement with Foreign Fighters for Prevention, Outreach, Rehabilitation and Reintegration'<sup>8</sup>, which contains 21 Good Practices on trust-building, outreach, substance and sustainability and a family support model for engagement with families, with concrete examples and lessons learned for direct and indirect engagement. Because of the rapid developments and challenges facing a number of European Member States, a RAN Cities Conference on Foreign Fighters to Syria took place on 30 January 2014. It gathered 120 local practitioners from 23 affected cities in the United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, as well as 50 representatives from the national authorities from most EU Member.<sup>9</sup> In two workshops the family support practices of the city of Antwerp (Belgium) and Aarhus (Denmark) were highlighted.<sup>10</sup> Finally, I have provided family support to two families of foreign fighters in the Netherlands as no family support structures were available in the Netherlands at that time, and parents turned to me as a researcher who regularly stressed the importance of supporting families in Dutch media outlets.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/RAN-Declaration-Good-Practices-for-Engagement-with-Foreign-Fighters.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/cities-conference/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/cities-conference/index_en.htm)

<sup>10</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/cities-conference/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/cities-conference/index_en.htm).

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It is precisely these types of practitioners' experiences and reflections that Pawson & Tilly consider valuable for developing a rudimentary theory on C-M-O configurations when evidence-based theory is lacking. They advocate the use of 'folk theories' (1997:88) deriving from qualitative investigation, what practitioners in the field of counter-radicalisation deem plausible programme mechanisms (what it was about the programme which might generate change in people vulnerable to radicalisation?) and contexts (with which sort of people in which conditions might the intervention be successful?). Using 'folk theories' is not uncommon within social science, as other scholars have referred to it as *reflection-in-action* (Schön & Rein, 1994), *mētis* (Scott, 1998) or *local knowledge* (Yanow, 1996, 2006).

### **Folk theories on family support: lessons learned**

The practitioner exchange within the RAN Network and my own experiences whilst providing family support to foreign fighters, provide us with some valuable lessons learned on family support in relation to foreign fighters. The most important lessons are highlighted below.

#### *Forms of family support*

Family support can take different forms. The degree and forms of pro-activeness can differ and the creation of an infrastructure where parents at least have the opportunity to seek help is important. The special 'hotline' (telephone number) which families can call if they are concerned about their family member is one such example, after which families can be referred to existing statutory or non-statutory bodies or like in the German case highly specialised NGO's, which have been set up for the main purpose of providing family support in relation to radicalisation, violent extremism and foreign fighters.

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Alternatively, family support can be initiated by (local) authorities on an individual and collective level. For example, by making house calls to parents whose children are considered at risk of becoming or have become radical or parents of foreign fighters can be invited to special family support groups in which they can talk about their experiences with fellow sufferers. Parents could also be steered towards taking courses on enhancing their parenting skills. Case managers can provide indirect support by organising professional services for family members. Types of services can range from mental health counselling, media training for those affected by intense media scrutiny and help with practical matters such as social services (for discontinuing any social welfare benefits or student grants of the foreign fighter for example).

Whatever form of family support is chosen, it must be sensitive to cultural issues and local contexts. In certain communities there are cultural barriers for seeking help and creative and pro-active ways might be necessary to break down these barriers, such as the community based telephone line that has been set up in the Netherlands or the Somali psychologist in Sweden who helps families of foreign fighters from Somali descent. In small and ethnically diverse communities in which youths have recruited each other ('peer recruitment') approaching and helping families individually might prove more effective. Group-based forms of family support in turn might be a better alternative in big, and therefore relatively anonymous cities.

### *Stages of family support*

Family support can take place at different stages. In its earliest stages family support can be targeted towards parents with individuals at risk, by talking about their anxieties and creating an open atmosphere in which children can talk and discuss extreme ideals and

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positive alternatives can be provided. When these ideals turn into violent extremist behaviour (and imprisonment), families can be supported whilst their child is imprisoned, which is done by for example the Violence Prevention Network also in Germany. Parents can be supported on how to rehabilitate and reintegrate their child after imprisonment (daily routine, support in going to school, finding a job etc.). Family support related to foreign fighters should be provided before, during and after travel. An example of support during travel is establishing contact between parents and child via social media (Facebook and Twitter) or other communication channels (such as What's App, Sure Spot or Skype), and supporting parents in creating a positive environment for a child to return home to, by supporting them in keeping an open communication channel with their children. In several of the above mentioned practices practitioners from NGO's and municipalities even help parents with emails or messages they can write to their children in Syria and Iraq.

### *Content of family support*

Clear rules and boundaries for engagement should be set from the outset. It is crucial that any type of family support both individually or collectively is as private and confidential as possible. When engaging with family members transparency and confidentiality is essential for trust-building. Family support should not be provided as a means to gain more information in a criminal investigation. As such, clarity about the goals and intentions of engagement is essential. Family support should always respect client confidentiality. Only in those situations where family councilors learn of a planned terrorist attack or a trip to or from Syria, should client confidentiality be breached. In those cases service providers should be open about their level of contact with police and security services and also about the goals and intentions of engagement. Whatever type of support is necessary, it is crucial to provide factual information to family members particularly in terms of legal statutes e.g. if

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their child or relative has committed a crime. Practitioners should be knowledgeable about the various legal statutes and provide clear information about what is legal and what is not.

Different families will require different types of support. For instance some will have legal questions (will my child be prosecuted upon return?), religious questions (what does it mean when my child says I should make *hijra*<sup>11</sup> and how should I respond?), questions about extremist organisations (has my child joined ISIS or a different group?), very practical questions (do I need to cancel my child's health care insurance?) whilst other families gain benefit from exchanging experiences with fellow sufferers. It is most likely that families seek a combination of the above mentioned questions, which in essence means that families require a tailor-made approach.

Support can be purely therapeutic, stimulating parents to address their emotions and anxieties, or encourage families to actively challenge and deconstruct some of the extremist narratives like in the German Hayat programme. Practitioners can help parents and family members adjust their communication and interaction with their relative whether the individual is at risk of becoming radicalised or already heavily involved in violent extremism. Family members will have numerous reactions some of which might include:

- Becoming very strict (authoritarian),
- Being strict but responsive to their relative's needs (authoritative),
- Setting no boundaries at all and at the same time not being responsive at all (neglectful)

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<sup>11</sup> Move to an Islamic country, in which usually the so-called Islamic State is meant.

- Being responsive to the needs of their relative, but lacking rules and discipline (permissive)<sup>12</sup>

It is important to support families by helping them develop an authoritative style in which there is a good balance in being ‘responsive’ (responding to the needs of their relative) and ‘demanding’ (setting boundaries) on the other hand. Practitioners should discourage family members from being confrontational and provide alternative means for civil communication. Such as in the case of the father that found out his 16-year old son was chatting online to terrorist organisation Jabhat-al-Nusra and threw his son’s laptop out of the window as he lacked (other) parenting skills to deal with the situation. It is important to support parents in talking to their children particularly in those cases where children are still involved with extremists. In cases where children have already left for Syria, parents have a tendency to either get very emotional or very angry when their children contact them. The focus should be on maintaining a positive relationship and parents should be encouraged to talk about normal things and daily life where possible. It is important to create an emotional boundary (by focusing on their well-being and not extremist issues), because in many cases the (potentially) radicalised individual is waiting for an excuse to break-up the contact and have evidence of disapproval.

In support groups, family members should talk about their relative but it should not be a forum for blame. Quite often there is ‘institutional blaming’. Parents, for example, might blame the security services for not preventing their children from becoming engaged with known extremists. It can be helpful to include those “blamed” when engaging. For example,

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<sup>12</sup> These four categories were presented by dr. Stijn Sieckelink from the University of Utrecht at a RAN INT/EXT meeting on 26-27 May in Berlin. These four categories were recognized by the various European family support practitioners attending the meeting



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this is being practiced in the Danish model where every once so often representatives of the Danish Intelligence Service PET and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are invited to the family support groups in the city of Aarhus. Some families may not want to talk about what their relatives are doing as they don't want to think about the shame or stigma associated with their actions. In these cases it can be helpful to include a psychologist, who can dispel taboos and encourage them to talk about these issues in meetings.

Although families can have a key role in preventing radicalisation or de-radicalisation, the role of the family may differ greatly from case to case. Some families represent protective factors like resourcefulness and close and positive relations to the person in question. Other families may well represent risk factors in the form of poor resources and relationships or even direct negative, ideological influence. In short, one should keep in mind that families can be part of the solution, or they can be part of the problem and so choosing family members to involve is crucial. When supporting families it is important to have a holistic approach, not just focussing on the parents, but on the family system as a whole. Brothers, sisters, cousins and peers can be just as affected if their family member is becoming radical or has turned to violent extremism. One should realise that they are also a group at risk which should be safeguarded as foreign fighters (including jihad brides) will most likely try to recruit other family members or friends.

### **Developing a theory on family support for empirical testing**

The above practice-based experiences, or folk theories, provide us with insights that can be used to develop hypotheses on so-called C-M-O configurations, the combination of mechanisms and context leading to outcome patterns indicating how programmes activate

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mechanisms among who and in what conditions, that in turn lead to (un)intended outcomes (Pawson & Tilley, 1997: 77). These hypotheses on C-M-O configurations can be used as a starting point for empirical testing of family support programmes either in a specific municipality, country or across Europe. To develop hypotheses on C-M-O configurations one needs to specify the relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcome patterns of family support based on the above mentioned practices and lessons learned.

### *Contexts*

Contexts describe those features of the conditions in which programmes are introduced that are relevant to the operation of the programme mechanisms. Context must not be confused with locality. Depending on the nature of the intervention, what is contextually significant may not only relate to place but also to individual capacities of key actors, the interpersonal relationships supporting the intervention, the institutional setting and the wider infra-structural system (Pawson & Tilley, 1997: 69). From the above mentioned family support practices and lessons learned, several contexts can be identified. Firstly, the target group of the family support: does it concern families whose child is an individual at risk (C<sub>1</sub>), someone who has become radical (C<sub>2</sub>), someone who has travelled to a conflict zone (C<sub>3</sub>), a family member or friend of someone who has travelled to a conflict zone (C<sub>4</sub>), someone who has been convicted for acting upon extremist ideas and is serving a prison sentence (C<sub>5</sub>) or a radical or extremist that needs re-integrated into society upon return from a conflict zone or after severing a prison sentence (C<sub>6</sub>)?

Although context should not be confused with locality, one cannot overlook the differences between cities and countries in terms of family support. Additional contexts are family support provided on a national/central (C<sub>7</sub>), federal (C<sub>8</sub>) or local level (C<sub>9</sub>). Family

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support can be provided ‘regular’ practitioners who are used to engaging with youths and families (C10), highly specialized practitioners who can rely on a long tradition of supporting families of (violent) extremists (C11) or members of the community (C12). Differentiation should also be made between big – and therefore relatively anonymous – cities (C13) and smaller cities and villages in which community members know each other rather well (C14). Also, family support can be provided on an individual (C15) or group basis (C16).

Parenting skills of the parents receiving family support might also provide an important contextual factor. Parents can either be very strict, also known as authoritarian (C17), or able to set clear rules and boundaries and at the same time responsive to their child’s needs, known as authoritative (C18), or parents whose style of parenting can be considered neglectful (C19) and finally those that are responsive to the needs of their child, but lack rules and discipline (C20). Certain language (C21) or cultural barriers such as shame (C22) might influence if and how families seek help from either statutory (C23) or non-statutory bodies (C24) that are either government funded (C25) or work on a voluntarily basis (C26).

### *Mechanisms*

Mechanisms describe what it is about programmes and interventions that bring about any effects. Mechanisms will only be active under particular circumstances, that is, in different contexts. Mechanisms are not the measures of a programme itself, but are the aspects of those measures that might trigger change (Pawson & Tilley, 1997: 66). A government or a community based telephone hotline is an easy accessible point that family members can contact for questions about (possible) radicalisation of their relative (M1). A telephone line connects parents to additional forms of family support to increase protective factors (M2). A

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telephone line provides information on early warning signals so that parents can better detect radicalisation (M3).

Individual family support to coach parents in developing/maintaining an 'authoritative parenting style' in which there is a good balance in being 'responsive' (responding to the needs of their relative) and 'demanding' (setting boundaries) on the other hand, creating an open atmosphere in which their relative can talk and discuss extremist ideas and positive alternatives can be provided instead of being confrontational or completely permissive and neglectful (M4). Individual family support or group-based family support to help and advice families in their direct contact with their children e.g. via social media, in order to (re)establish a positive family relationship (M5). Individual or collective family support provides parents with counter-narratives so that they can de-construct the extremist narrative of their child (M6). Providing information on an individual or group basis about the recruitment mechanisms their loved one who have travelled to Syria or another conflict zone (might) apply, so that families are better equipped in detecting possible recruitment, so other family members and friends can be safeguarded (M7).

### *Outcome*

Outcome-patterns comprise the intended and unintended consequences of programmes, resulting from the activation of different mechanisms in different contexts (Pawson & Tilley, 1997: 217). In its earliest stages an outcome pattern can be the prevention of radicalisation (O1) or prevention of travel (O2). When radicalisation does occur, family support can be offered for purposes of de-radicalisation (O3) or in case of travel to stimulate foreign fighters to return home (O4) rehabilitation (O5) for convicted extremists or returned foreign fighters.

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*Configurated C-M-O hypotheses*

Based on the above insights on contexts, mechanisms and outcomes, we can extract several C-M-O configurations which provide us with a 'rough theory' on family support as part of counter-radicalisation policy, which could be used for empirical testing.

- In its earliest stages to prevent radicalisation (O<sub>1</sub>) or travel (O<sub>2</sub>), family support can be provided to parents with individuals at risk (C<sub>1</sub>), in which parents are coached in an 'authoritative parenting style' in which there is a good balance in being 'responsive' (responding to the needs of their relative) and 'demanding' (setting boundaries) on the other hand, creating an open atmosphere in which their relative can talk and discuss extremist ideas and positive alternatives can be provided instead of being confrontational or completely permissive (M<sub>4</sub>).
- A telephone line is an easy accessible point that family members of individuals at risk (C<sub>1</sub>) or radicalised young people (C<sub>2</sub>), can contact for questions about (possible) radicalisation of their relative (M<sub>1</sub>) to prevent radicalisation (O<sub>1</sub>) or travel (O<sub>2</sub>). Additionally, to prevent radicalisation (O<sub>1</sub>) or travel (O<sub>2</sub>), a community based telephone hotline might be more accessible for family members of individuals at risk (C<sub>1</sub>) or radicalised young people (C<sub>2</sub>) in which certain language (C<sub>21</sub>) or cultural barriers such as shame (C<sub>22</sub>).
- A telephone line for families of individuals at risk (C<sub>1</sub>) and radicals (C<sub>2</sub>) connects parents to additional forms of family support to increase protective factors (M<sub>2</sub>) and provides information on early warning signals so that parents can better detect radicalisation (M<sub>3</sub>), to prevent radicalisation (O<sub>1</sub>) and travel (O<sub>2</sub>).
- Individual family or group-based family support provides families of foreign fighters (C<sub>3</sub>) tips and advice in their direct contact with their children e.g. via social media,

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in order to (re-)establish a positive family relationship (M5), creating a positive environment for a child to return home (O4).

- Forms of individual or collective support for family members of those that are (C2) or at risk of becoming radicalised (C1) provides parents with counter-narratives so that they can de-construct the extremist narrative of their child (M6) in order to prevent radicalisation (O1), travel (O2) or contribute to de-radicalisation (O3).
- Providing information to families of foreign fighters (C3) or close to a foreign fighter (C4) on individual or group basis about the recruit mechanisms apply, so that families are better equipped in detecting possible recruitment, so other family members and friends can be safeguarded (M7) in order to prevent others from travelling (O2).
- Highly specialised practitioners who can rely on a long tradition of supporting families of (violent) extremists (C11) can offer individual or collective forms of family support in which parents are provided with counter-narratives so that they can de-construct the extremist narrative of their child (M6) purposes of de-radicalisation (O3).

## **Conclusion and discussion**

The German model has inspired countries and communities to develop forms of family support as part of their counter-radicalisation strategy. However, different countries, cities and communities have chosen for an approach that fit their specific context, which has led to various forms of family support across Europe. Drawing on realist evaluation and practitioner experience – which has been unprecedented in this field - provides us with the

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opportunity to hypothesize on what might work, for whom, by whom and why in family support. This article has presented C-M-O configurations on family support which are by no means comprehensive, but serve as a starting point of developing hypotheses for empirical testing. Further specifications might also be made in relation to who provides the family support: practitioners from statutory bodies or community-based forms of support, the form of support (individual or group-based) and the institutional infrastructure on a national, federal, local and community level.

I would like to call upon the academic, policy and practitioner community to further develop these configured C-M-O hypotheses on family support, by providing me with feedback on the above mentioned contexts, mechanisms and outcome based on their experiences with family support in relation to the prevention and countering of radicalisation. Additionally, we could also draw lessons and hypotheses for C-M-O configurations from other areas, such as prevention of criminality of safeguarding children in which family counseling is considered an evidence-based approach (Van der Laan, 2012; Van Yperen, 2012). Ultimately, the aim would be to start empirically testing (one of) the many family support practices in different communities, cities and countries across Europe utilising the realist evaluation method of which the above C-M-O configurations are an important part.

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